

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
AID-05 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 /086 W
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R 191715Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2321
INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN
AMEMBASSY KINGSTON

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PORT OF SPAIN 1233

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, TD
SUBJECT: NEW DEVELOPMENTS ON THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE

REF: PORT OF SPAIN 1039

1. SUMMARY. SINCE THE RESIGNATION OF HECTOR MCCLEAN AS MINISTER OF WORKS AND FROM PNM MEMBERSHIP AND THE RETURN OF BASDEO PANDAY AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION AT THE END OF MARCH, SEVERAL DEVELOPMENTS HAVE OCCURRED WHICH ARE KEEPING THE POLITICAL POT BOILING HERE. PERHAPS FACED WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF FURTHER DEFECTIONS FROM THE PARTY OR SIMPLY TO REMIND PEOPLE WHO IS BOSS, PRIME MINISTER WILLIAMS SEEMS TO HAVE STRUCK A DEAL WITH PANDAY TO ENSURE PASSAGE IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT STIPULATING THAT ANY MP WHO RESIGNS OR IS EXPELLED FROM HIS PARTY SHALL VACATE HIS SEAT. IN TURN THE PNM SUPPORTED PANDAY'S CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT, WHICH ALSO PASSED IN THE HOUSE, REQUIRING THAT A BY-ELECTION BE HELD WITHIN 90 DAYS OF THE TIME A SEAT BECOMES VACANT. THE TWO AMENDMENTS FURTHER CONFUSED THE OPPOSITION PICTURE IN PARLIAMENT, AND THEIR PASSAGE WAS ACCOM-
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PANIED BY RENEWED RUMORS OF EARLY GENERAL ELECTIONS, AS WELL AS BY STRONG CRITICISM FROM THE PRESS.
END SUMMARY.

2. SHORTLY AFTER THE RESIGNATION OF HECTOR MCCLEAN AS MINISTER OF WORKS AND FROM THE RULING PEOPLE'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT (PNM), A CLEAR CHALLENGE TO PARTY

DISCIPLINE, PM WILLIAMS ENDED HIS ANNUAL WINTER "HIBERNATION" BY TAKING BOLD STEPS TO HALT ANY FURTHER DEFECTIONS. RATHER THAN ATTEMPTING TO INVOKE MCCLEAN'S UNDATED LETTER OF RESIGNATION, WHOSE QUESTIONABLE LEGALITY MIGHT HAVE BEEN TESTED IN THE COURTS, WILLIAMS DECIDED INSTEAD TO BLOCK ANY FURTHER DEFEC-

TIONS BY THE QUICKER AND SURER EXPEDIENT OF PASSING A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PROVIDING THAT ANY MP ELECTED WITH THE SUPPORT OF A POLITICAL PARTY SHALL LOSE HIS SEAT IF HE RESIGNS OR IS EXPELLED FROM THAT PARTY. TO WIN HOUSE APPROVAL OF THIS AMENDMENT, WILLIAMS NEEDED AFFIRMATIVE VOTES FROM TWO-THIRDS OF THE MEMBERS (24). SINCE MCCLEAN'S DEFECTION, HOWEVER, THE PNM HAD ONLY 23 MPS, AND THERE WAS ALWAYS SOME QUESTION WHETHER OR NOT ALL FIVE OF THE SO-CALLED PNM "MILLSTONES" WOULD SUPPORT SUCH MEASURE WHICH AFTER ALL COULD BE USED AGAINST THEM AT ANY TIME.

3. FACED WITH THIS PROBLEM, THE PM DID SOMETHING HE HAD NOT DONE SINCE 1971 -- ON APRIL 11 HE MET PRIVATELY FOR TWO HOURS WITH A LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, IN THIS CASE, BASDEO PANDRY. THE TOPICS OF THEIR DISCUSSION, AT WHICH AG SELWYN RICHARDSON ALSO WAS PRESENT, HAVE NOT BEEN FULLY DISCLOSED, BUT THE APRIL 14 SESSION OF THE HOUSE CONFIRMED THE WIDELY-HELD SUSPICION THAT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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TWO POLITICAL RIVALS HAD MADE A DEAL. AT THAT SESSION PANDAY ANNOUNCED THAT HE WOULD BACK THE PROPOSED AMENDMENT PROVIDED THAT THE GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED HIS AMENDMENT REQUIRING THAT A BY-ELECTION BE HELD WITHIN 90 DAYS AFTER A SEAT BECOMES VACANT (THE CONSTITUTION CURIOUSLY OMITTS ANY SPECIFIC TIME LIMIT FOR THE HOLDING OF BY-ELECTIONS). FOR TACTICAL REASONS, THE TWO AMENDMENTS WERE CONSIDERED SEPARATELY BY THE HOUSE. THE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSAL PASSED BY 27 TO 8 AFTER A MARATHON SESSION ON APRIL 14, WHILE PANDAY'S LESS CONTROVERSIAL AMENDMENT SAILED THROUGH BY 28 TO 6 ON APRIL 17. BOTH AMENDMENTS HAVE GONE TO THE SENATE WHERE THEY PASSED BY THE REQUIRED TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY WITH VOTES TO SPARE ON APRIL 18.

4. WHILE WINNING THE HOUSE TEST (WITH EVEN THE "MILLSTONES" PLACIDLY VOTING "AYE") THE GOVERNMENT'S "ANTI-FLOOR-CROSSING AMENDMENT IS DRAWING HEAVY FIRE FROM THE PRESS, PROMINENT LAWYERS AND TO SOME EXTENT THE GENERAL PUBLIC. THE CRITICISM HAS CENTERED ON THE FACT THAT THE AMENDMENT WOULD MAKE MPS ENTIRELY DEPENDENT ON THEIR PARTIES, RATHER THAN THE VIEWS

OF THEIR CONSTITUENTS OR THEIR OWN CONSCIENCES, IN THEIR ACTIONS IN PARLIAMENT. THE CRITICS FURTHER AGREE THAT AN UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY OF THE CONSTITUTION IS BEING ALTERED, WITH ONLY A MINIMUM OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION AND DEBATE. PANDAY, FOR HIS PART, IS BEING ATTACHED FOR "SELLING OUT" TO THE PNM, SINCE WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF HIS UNITED LABOR FRONT (ULF) FACTION, THE GOVERNMENT'S AMENDMENT COULD NOT HAVE PASSED.

5. COMMENT. WILLIAMS HAS ONCE AGAIN SHOWED HIS TACTICAL GRASP OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO'S POLITICS, AS WELL, PERHAPS, AS HIS CONTEMPT FOR PUBLIC OPINION. NOW THAT THE AMENDMENTS HAVE PASSED IN THE SENATE (ONLY THE FORMALITY OF THE PRESIDENT'S SIGNATURE IS REQUIRED
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FOR THEM TO BECOME LAW). THE PM SOON WILL HAVE AVAILABLE ANOTHER MEANS TO TIGHTEN PARTY DISCIPLINE. ONE MIGHT LEGITIMATELY WONDER WHETHER SUCH IS NEEDED HERE, BUT "OVERKILL" HAS BECOME A WILLIAMS' HALLMARK-- IN DEALING WITH POLITICAL RIVALS AND OTHER ANNOYANCES.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PORT OF SPAIN 1233

6. IT IS PANDAY, HOWEVER, WHO HAS PUT HIS HEAD ON THE BLOCK AND WHO NOW STANDS TO WIN, OR LOSE, THE MOST.

HIS IMMEDIATE PROBLEM IS TO CONVINCE HIS FOLLOWERS THAT IF HE HAS IN FACT SOLD HIS SOUL TO THE DEVIL, THE PRICE, AT LEAST, IS RIGHT. IN THIS CONNECTION, RUMORS ARE NOW CIRCULATING THAT IN HIS MEETING WITH PANDAY THE PM AGREED TO A HEFTY 60 PER CENT WAGE HIKE FOR THE SUGAR WORKERS IN THEIR CURRENTLY DEADLOCKED NEGOTIATIONS WITH STATE-OWNED CARONI LTD. IF THIS PROVES TRUE, PANDAY'S STANDING WITH HIS PREDOMINATLY EAST INDIAN SUPPORTERS WILL REMAIN RELATIVELY SOLID, AND PANDAY MAY HAVE IN THE AMENDMENT THE INSTRUMENT HE NEEDS FOR OUSTING HIS ARCHRIVAL RAFFIQUE SHAH AND SHAH'S FACTION FROM THE HOUSE, AS WELL AS FOR TIGHTENING HIS OWN TENUOUS CONTROL OVER SOME OF HIS OWN MPS.

7. BUT THE BIGGEST NEWS IS THE INCREASINGLY LIKELY PROSPECT THAT WILLIAMS WILL CALL GENERAL ELECTIONS (PERHAPS AS EARLY AS JUNE, OR ELSE IN SEPTEMBER OR OCTOBER). AG RICHARDSON INFORMED THE HOUSE APRIL 17 THAT NEW ELECTION LISTS ARE BEING PREPARED, A STEP WHICH USUALLY PRECEDES GENERAL ELECTIONS, AND THE CONFIDENTIAL

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PM HIMSELF WAS QUOTED RECENTLY AS SAYING THAT HE HAS SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL IN MIND. IF HE DOES CALL ELECTIONS, WILLIAMS'S THREE MAIN GOALS WILL BE TO ROLL THE HAPLESS "MILLSTONES" (WHO SOMEHOW MANAGED TO SURVIVE THE PNM PURGE IN 1976--AND HAVE BEEN THE OBJECT OF THE PM'S DERISION EVER SINCE) INTO THE CREEK, REGAIN TOBAGO FROM THE DAC FOR THE PNM, AND DELIVER THE COUP DE GRAS TO AT LEAST THE OTHER MOST OBJECTION-ABLE ELEMENTS OF THE OPPOSITION (I.E., THE SHAH ULF FACTION AND HECTOR MCCLEAN). NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE MUCH PRACTICAL EFFECT ON HOW T&T IS GOVERNED, BUT, AS WE SAID, OVERKILL IS THE HALLMARK OF WILLIAMS'S POLITICS.
FOX

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